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Study Abroad Reflection: Japan

This summer, I had the chance to study abroad in Japan, and it was an eye-opening experience. When I first went, my main goal was to work on my Japanese reading, especially kanji, because I knew that was something I needed to improve. But once I was actually in Japan, my goals started to shift. At first, I thought I'd just focus on improving through regular practice, but being surrounded by Japanese really changed things. It wasn't just about studying from books anymore—I was seeing kanji everywhere, from street signs to menus, and it started to click in a way it hadn't before. I realized that learning kanji isn't just about memorizing characters; it's about understanding which ones are useful in daily life. So, my focus shifted from just improving my reading to really mastering the kanji that would help me navigate everyday situations in Japan.

One thing that really stood out to me was how different the work culture is in Japan compared to the U.S. In Japan, people spend a lot more time at work, and it's not just about getting things done quickly—it's about making sure the work is done with the highest quality. For example, during my internship, I noticed that everyone took their time to ensure everything was perfect, whereas in the U.S., there's often more of a push to get things done quickly. While it took some time to get used to this approach, I came to appreciate how much attention to detail is valued. Even though the pace is different, both cultures are working toward the same goals: getting things done and making sure they're done well.

One of the most memorable parts of my trip was adjusting to that Japanese work environment. At first, I struggled with the long hours and the high expectations, but over time, I realized this was teaching me something valuable. The emphasis on quality over speed helped me change my mindset when it comes to work. I found myself focusing more on doing things right, even if it took longer, which was very different from what I was used to. This lesson is something I'll carry with me, especially as I move forward in my career—it's a mindset I can apply no matter where I end up working.

Another thing that really had an impact on me was how people in Japan perceived me, especially as someone who's half-Japanese. I've always had a connection to the culture, but living there full-time gave me a new perspective. I was surprised by how much my Japanese had improved, and it was a huge confidence boost to be able to have real conversations with locals. I started to see myself differently—I wasn't just a visitor, I felt like I had a place in Japanese society. This experience helped me feel more adaptable, and it

made me appreciate how I can navigate between my American and Japanese identities more confidently.

Academically, this experience was just as important. One of the coolest things was being exposed to different dialects, which wasn't something I'd experienced much before. Meeting people who spoke in those dialects gave me a broader understanding of how diverse Japanese culture really is. Plus, being in an environment where I had to use Japanese every day forced me to get better at kanji. I learned which characters are most useful in everyday situations, and that knowledge has already made a big difference in my studies. This experience pushed me to go beyond the classroom and really engage with the language and culture in a way that I wouldn't have been able to back home.

This experience made me appreciate Japanese culture even more than I already did. Spending two months there was the longest time I'd ever been in Japan, and it gave me the chance to connect more deeply with the culture and the people. One particularly memorable moment was when I had a conversation with an older man outside of a bar one evening. We started talking about Japan in general, but eventually, the topic shifted to what it's like being half-Japanese. He was genuinely curious about my experience growing up in two different worlds, American and Japanese, and wanted to know how I balanced the two. It felt like a real moment of connection because I could see he was trying to understand something he hadn't really experienced himself.

That conversation made me reflect on my identity in ways I hadn't before. I always knew being half-Japanese made me different, but hearing his perspective gave me new insight. He expressed how Japan is changing, becoming more open to mixed identities, and how people like me could play a role in bridging the gap between Japan and other cultures. It made me realize that my dual background is more than just a personal experience. It is also a way to contribute to both cultures. After that conversation, I felt a stronger sense of belonging in Japan, like I was seeing my identity from a new angle—not just as a visitor or a student, but as someone with a meaningful connection to the country.

In the end, my time in Japan gave me a lot more than I expected. I didn't just improve my language skills—I came back with a better understanding of the culture, a stronger work ethic, and a greater sense of self. The experience taught me how to adapt to different environments, and it made me realize how much I can accomplish when I push myself out of my comfort zone. I feel more connected to both the U.S. and Japan now, and I know that what I learned there will shape how I approach my future, both personally and professionally.

